



108

Greatest Of All Times

*globally selected
PERSONALITIES*

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Compiled by:
Prof Dr S Ramalingam

9 Jan 1959 <::><::><::> 66 Years



“The world is not
going to change
unless we are
willing to
change
ourselves.”

RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ TUM
Nobel Peace Prize 1992



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9 Jan 1959



66 Years

Rigoberta Menchú Tum
Nobel Peace Prize 1992

Born: 9 January 1959, Aldea Chimel, Guatemala
Residence at the time of the award: Guatemala

Prize motivation:

"for her struggle for social justice and ethno-cultural
reconciliation based on respect for the rights
of indigenous peoples"

Prize share: 1/1

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1992/tum/facts/>

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1992/tum/biographical/>



Nobel Lecture - Dec. 10, 1992

Rigoberta Menchu

December 10, 1992— Oslo, Norway

<https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/nobel-lecture-dec-10-1992/>

Your Majesties, the King and Queen of Norway,
The Honorable Members of the Nobel Peace Committee,
Your Excellency, the Prime Minister,
Your Excellencies, Members of the Government and the Diplomatic Corps,
Dear Guatemalan countrymen and women,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel a deep emotion and pride for the honor of having been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 1992. A deep personal feeling and pride for my country and its very ancient culture. For the values of the community and the people to which I belong, for the love of my country, of Mother Nature. Whoever understands this respects life and encourages the struggle that aims at such objectives.

I consider this Prize, not as a reward to me personally, but rather as one of the greatest conquests in the struggle for peace, for Human Rights and for the rights of the indigenous people, who, for 500 years, have been split, fragmented, as well as the victims of genocides, repression and discrimination.

Please allow me to convey to you all, what this Prize means to me.

In my opinion, the Nobel Peace Prize calls upon us to act in accordance with what it represents, and the great significance it has worldwide. In addition to being a priceless treasure, it is an instrument with which to fight for peace, for justice, for the rights of those who suffer the abysmal economic, social, cultural and political inequalities, typical of the order of the world in which we live, and where the transformation into a new world based on the values of the human being, is the expectation of the majority of those who live on this planet.

This Nobel Prize represents a standard bearer that encourages us to continue denouncing the violation of Human Rights, committed against the people in Guatemala, in America and in the world, and to perform a positive role in respect of the pressing task in my country, which is to achieve peace with social justice.

The Nobel Prize is a symbol of peace, and of the efforts to build up a real democracy. It will stimulate the civil sectors so that through a solid national unity, these may contribute to the process of negotiations that seek peace, reflecting the general feeling – although at times not possible to express because of fear – of Guatemalan society: to establish political and legal grounds that will give irreversible impulses to a solution to what initiated the internal armed conflict.

There is no doubt whatsoever that it constitutes a sign of hope in the struggle of the indigenous people in the entire Continent.

It is also a tribute to the Central-American people who are still searching for their stability, for the structuring of their future, and the path for their development and integration, based on civil democracy and mutual respect.

The importance of this Nobel Prize has been demonstrated by all the congratulations received from everywhere, from Heads of Government – practically all the American Presidents – to the organizations of the indigenous people and of Human Rights, from all over the world. In fact, what they see in this Nobel Peace Prize is not only a reward and a recognition of a single person, but a starting point for the hard struggle towards the achievement of that revindication which is yet to be fulfilled.

As a contrast, and paradoxically, it was actually in my own country where I met, on the part of some people, the strongest objections, reserve and indifference, for the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to this Quiché Indian. Perhaps because in Latin America, it is precisely in Guatemala where the discrimination towards the indigenous, towards women, and the repression of the longing for justice and peace, are more deeply rooted in certain social and political sectors.

Under present circumstances, in this disordered and complex world, the decision of the Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize Committee to award this honorable distinction to me, reflects the awareness of the fact that, in this way, courage and strength is given to the struggle of peace, reconciliation and justice; to the struggle against racism, cultural discrimination, and hence contributes to the achievement of harmonious co-existence between our people.

With deep pain, on one side, but with satisfaction on the other, I have to inform you that the Nobel Peace Prize 1992 will have to remain temporarily in Mexico City, in watchful waiting for peace in Guatemala. Because there are no political conditions in my country that would indicate or make me foresee a prompt and just solution. The satisfaction and gratitude are due to the fact that Mexico, our brother neighbor country, that has been so dedicated and interested, that has made such great efforts in respect of the negotiations that are being conducted to achieve peace, that has received and admitted so many refugees and exiled Guatemalans, has given us a place in the Museo del Templo Mayor (the cradle of the ancient Aztecs) so that the Nobel Prize may remain there, until peaceful and safe conditions are established in Guatemala to place it here, in the land of the Quetzal.¹

When evaluating the overall significance of the award of the Peace Prize, I would like to say some words on behalf of all those whose voice cannot be heard or who have been repressed for having spoken their opinions, of all those who have been marginalized, who have been discriminated, who live in poverty, in need, of all those who are the victims of repression and violation of human rights. Those who, nevertheless, have endured through centuries, who have not lost their conscience, determination, and hope.

Please allow me, ladies and gentlemen, to say some words about my country and the civilization of the Mayas. The Maya people developed and spread geographically through some 300,000 square km; they occupied parts of the South of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, as well as Honduras and El Salvador; they developed a very rich civilization in the area of political organization, as well as in social and economic fields; they were great scientists in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, agriculture, architecture and engineering; they were great artists in the fields of sculpture, painting, weaving and carving.

The Mayas discovered the zero value in mathematics, at about the same time that it was discovered in India and later passed on to the Arabs. Their astronomic forecasts based on mathematical calculations and scientific observations were amazing, and still are. They prepared a calendar more accurate than the Gregorian, and in the field of medicine they performed intracranial surgical operations.

One of the Maya books, which escaped destruction by the conquistadores, known as *The Codex of Dresden*, contains the results of an investigation on eclipses as well as a table of 69 dates, in which solar eclipse occur in a lapse of 33 years.

Today, it is important to emphasize the deep respect that the Maya civilization had towards life and nature in general.

Who can predict what other great scientific conquests and developments these people could have achieved, if they had not been conquered by blood and fire, and subjected to an ethnocide that affected nearly 50 million people in the course of 500 years.

I would describe the meaning of this Nobel Peace prize, in the first place as a tribute to the Indian people who have been sacrificed and have disappeared because they aimed at a more dignified and just life with fraternity and understanding among human beings. To those who are no longer alive to keep up the hope for a change in the situation in respect of poverty and marginalization of the Indians, of those who have been banished, of the helpless in Guatemala as well as in the entire American Continent.

This growing concern is comforting, even though it comes 500 years later, to the suffering, the discrimination, the oppression and the exploitation that our peoples have been exposed to, but who, thanks to their own cosmovision – and concept of life, have managed to withstand and finally see some promising prospects. How those roots, that were to be eradicated, now begin to grow with strength, hope and visions of the future!

It also represents a sign of the growing international interest for, and understanding of the original Rights of the People, of the future of more than 60 million Indians that live in our Americas, and their outcry because of the 500 years of oppression that they have endured. For the genocide beyond comparison that they have had to suffer throughout this epoch, and from which other countries and the elite of the Americas have profited and taken advantage.

Let there be freedom for the Indians, wherever they may be in the American Continent or elsewhere in the world, because while they are alive, a glow of hope will be alive as well as a true concept of life.

The expressions of great happiness by the Indian Organizations in the entire Continent and the worldwide congratulations received for the award of the Nobel Peace Prize, clearly indicate the great importance of this decision. It is the recognition of the European debt to the American indigenous people; it is an appeal to the conscience of Humanity so that those conditions of marginalization that condemned them to colonialism and exploitation may be eradicated; it is a cry for life, peace, justice, equality and fraternity between human beings.

The peculiarities of the vision of the Indian people are expressed according to the way in which they are related to each other. First, between human beings, through communication. Second, with the earth, as with our mother, because she gives us our lives and is not mere merchandise. Third, with nature, because we are an integral part of it, and not its owners.

To us Mother Earth is not only a source of economic riches that give us the maize, which is our life, but she also provides so many other things that the privileged ones of today strive for. The Earth is the root and the source of our culture. She keeps our memories, she receives our ancestors and she, therefore, demands that we honor her and return to her, with tenderness and respect, those goods that she gives us. We have to take care of her so that our children and grandchildren may continue to benefit from her. If the world does not learn now to show respect to nature, what kind of future will the new generations have?

From these basic features derive behavior, rights and obligations in the American Continent, for the indigenous people as well as for the non-indigenous, whether they be racially mixed, blacks, whites or Asian. The whole society has an obligation to show mutual respect, to learn from each other and to share material and scientific achievements, in the most convenient way. The indigenous peoples never had, and still do not have, the place that they should have occupied in the progress and benefits of science and technology, although they represented an important basis for this development.

If the indigenous civilization and the European civilizations could have made exchanges in a peaceful and harmonious manner, without destruction, exploitation, discrimination and poverty, they could, no doubt, have achieved greater and more valuable conquests for Humanity.

Let us not forget that when the Europeans came to America, there were flourishing and strong civilization there. One cannot talk about a "discovery of America", because one discovers that which one does not know about, or that which is hidden. But America and its native civilizations had discovered themselves long before the fall of the Roman Empire and Medieval Europe. The significance of its cultures forms part of the heritage of humanity and continues to astonish the learned.

I think it is necessary that the indigenous peoples, of which I am a member, should contribute their science and knowledge to human development, because we have enormous potential and we could combine our very ancient heritage with the achievements of European civilization as well as with civilizations in other parts of the world.

But this contribution, that to our understanding is a recovery of the natural and cultural heritage, must take place based on a rational and consensual basis in respect of the right to make use of knowledge and natural resources, with guarantees for equality between Government and society.

We the indigenous are willing to combine tradition with modernism, but not at any cost. We will not tolerate or permit that our future be planned as possible guardians of ethno-touristic projects on a continental level.

At a time when the commemoration of the Fifth Centenary of the arrival of Columbus in America has repercussions all over the world, the revival of hope for the oppressed indigenous peoples demands that we reassert our existence to the world and the value of our cultural identity. It demands that we endeavor to actively participate in the decisions that concern our destiny, in the building-up of our countries/nations. Should we, in spite of all, not be taken into consideration, there are factors that guarantee our future: struggle and endurance; courage; the decision to maintain our traditions that have been exposed to so many perils and sufferings; solidarity towards our struggle on the part of numerous countries, governments, organizations and citizens of the world.

That is why I dream of the day when the relationship between the indigenous peoples and other peoples is strengthened; when they can combine their potentialities and their capabilities and contribute to make life on this planet less unequal, a better distribution of the scientific and cultural treasures accumulated by Humanity, flourishing in peace and justice.

Today, in the 47th period of sessions of the General Assembly, the United Nations (UN) will proclaim 1993 as the *International Year of the World's Indigenous People*, in the presence of well-known chiefs of the organizations of the Indian people and of the coordination of the Continental Movement of Indigenous, Blacks and Popular Resistance. They will all formally participate in the opening of the working sessions in order to make 1993 a year of specific actions to truly place the indigenous peoples within their national contexts and to make them part of mutual international agreements.

The achievement of the *International Year of the World's Indigenous People* and the progress represented by the preparation of the project for the *Universal Declaration*, are the result of the participation of numerous Indian brothers, nongovernmental organizations and the successful efforts of the experts in the Working group, in addition to the comprehensiveness shown by many countries in the United Nations.

We hope that the formulation of the project in respect of the Declaration on the Rights of the indigenous People will examine and go deeply into the existing difficulty reality that we, the Indo-Americans, experience. ²

Our people will have a year dedicated to the problems that afflict them and, in this respect, are now getting ready to carry out different activities with the purpose of presenting proposals and putting pressure on action plans. All this will be conducted in the most reasonable way and with the most convincing and justified arguments for the elimination of racism, oppression, discrimination and the exploitation of those who have been dragged into poverty and oblivion. Also for "the condemned of the earth", the award of the Nobel Peace Prize represents a recognition, an encouragement and an objective for the future.

I wish that a conscious sense of peace and a feeling of human solidarity would develop in all peoples, which would open new relationships of respect and equality for the next millennium, to be ruled by fraternity and not by cruel conflicts.

Opinion is being formed everywhere today, that in spite of wars and violence, calls upon the entire human race to protect its historical values and to form unity in diversity. And this calls upon us all to reflect upon the incorporation of important elements of change and transformation in all aspects of life on earth, in the search for specific and definite solutions to the deep ethical crisis that afflicts Humanity. This will, no doubt have decisive influence on the structure of the future.

There is a possibility that some centers of political and economic power, some statesmen and intellectuals, have not yet managed to see the advantages of the active participation of the indigenous peoples in all the fields of human activity. However, the movement initiated by different political and intellectual "Amerindians" will finally convince them that, from an objective point of view, we are a constituent part of the historical alternatives that are being discussed at the international level.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to say some candid words about my country.

The attention that this Nobel Peace Prize has focused on Guatemala, should imply that the violation of the human rights is no longer ignored internationally. It will also honor all those who died in the struggle for social equality and justice in my country.

It is known throughout the world that the Guatemalan people, as a result of their struggle, succeeded in achieving, in October 1944, a period of democracy where institutionality and human rights were the main philosophies. At that time, Guatemala was an exception in the American Continent, because of its struggle for complete national sovereignty. However, in 1954, a conspiracy that associated the traditional national power centers, inheritors of colonialism, with powerful foreign interests, overthrew the democratic regime as a result of an armed invasion, thereby re-imposing the old system of oppression which has characterized the history of my country. ³

The economic, social and political subjection that derived from the Cold War, was what initiated the internal armed conflict. The repression against the organizations of the people, the democratic parties and the intellectuals, started in Guatemala long before the war started. Let us not forget that.

In the attempt to crush rebellion, dictatorships have committed the greatest atrocities. They have leveled villages, and murdered thousands of peasants particularly Indians, hundreds of trade union workers and students, outstanding intellectuals and politicians, priests and nuns. Through this systematic persecution in the name of the safety of the nation, one million peasants were removed by force from their lands; 100,000 had to seek refuge in the neighboring countries. In Guatemala, there are today almost 100,000 orphans and more than 40,000 widows. The practice of "disappeared" politicians was invented in Guatemala, as a government policy.

As you know, I am myself a survivor of a massacred family.

The country collapsed into a crisis never seen before and the changes in the world forced and encouraged the military forces to permit a political opening that consisted in the preparation of a new Constitution, in an expansion of the political field, and in the transfer of the government to civil sectors. We have had this new regime for eight years and in certain fields there have been some openings of importance.

However, in spite of these openings, repression and violation of human rights persists in the middle of an economic crisis, that is becoming more and more acute, to the extent that 84% of the population is today considered as poor, and some 60% are considered as very poor. Impunity and terror continue to prevent people from freely expressing their needs and vital demands. The internal armed conflict still exists.

The political life in my country has lately centered around the search for a political solution to the global crisis and the armed conflict that has existed in Guatemala since 1962. This process was initiated by the Agreement signed in this City of Oslo, between the Comisión Nacional de Reconciliación with government mandate, and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) as a necessary step to introduce to Guatemala the spirit of the Agreement of Esquipulas.⁴

As a result of this Agreement and conversations between the URNG and different sectors of Guatemalan society, direct negotiations were initiated under the government of President Serrano, between the government and the guerrillas, as a result of which three agreements have already been signed. However, the subject of Human Rights has taken a long time, because this subject constitutes the core of the Guatemalan problems, and around this core important differences have arisen. Nevertheless, there has been considerable progress.

The process of negotiations aims at reaching agreements in order to establish the basis for a real democracy in Guatemala and for an end to the war. As far as I understand, with the goodwill of the parties concerned and the active participation of the civil sectors, adapting to a great national unity, the phase of purposes and

intentions could be left behind so that Guatemala could be pulled out of the crossroads that seem to have become eternal.

Dialogues and political negotiations are, no doubt, adequate means to solve these problems, in order to respond in a specific way to the vital and urgent needs for life and for the implementation of democracy for the Guatemalan people. However, I am convinced that if the diverse social sectors which integrate Guatemalan society find bases of unity, respecting their natural differences, they would together find a solution to those problems and therefore resolve the causes which initiated the war which prevails in Guatemala.

Other civil sectors as well as the international community must demand that the negotiations between the Government and the URNG surpass the period in which they are finding themselves in discussing Human Rights and move ahead as soon as possible to a verifiable agreement with the United Nations. It is necessary to point out, here in Oslo, that the issue of Human Rights in Guatemala constitutes, at present, the most urgent problem that has to be solved. My statement is neither incidental nor unjustified.

As has been ascertained by international institutions, such as The United Nations Commission on Human Rights, The Interamerican Commission of Human Rights and many other humanitarian organizations, Guatemala is one of the countries in America with the largest number of violations of these rights, and the largest number of cases of impunity where security forces are generally involved. It is imperative that the repression and persecution of the people and the Indians be stopped. The compulsory mobilization and integration of young people into the Patrols of Civil Self Defense, which principally affects the Indian people, must also be stopped.

Democracy in Guatemala must be built-up as soon as possible. It is necessary that Human Rights agreements be fully complied with, i.e. an end to racism; guaranteed freedom to organize and to move within all sectors of the country. In short, it is imperative to open all fields to the multi-ethnic civil society with all its rights, to demilitarize the country and establish the basis for its development, so that it can be pulled out of today's underdevelopment and poverty.

Among the most bitter dramas that a great percentage of the population has to endure, is the forced exodus. Which means, to be forced by military units and persecution to abandon their villages, their Mother Earth, where their ancestors rest, their environment, the nature that gave them life and the growth of their communities, all of which constituted a coherent system of social organization and functional democracy.

The case of the displaced and of refugees in Guatemala is heartbreaking; some of them are condemned to live in exile in other countries, but the great majority live in exile in their own country. They are forced to wander from place to place, to live in ravines and inhospitable places, some not recognized as Guatemalan citizens, but all of them are condemned to poverty and hunger. There cannot be a true democracy as

long as this problem is not satisfactorily solved and these people are reinstated on their lands and in their villages.

In the new Guatemalan society, there must be a fundamental reorganization in the matter of land ownership, to allow for the development of the agricultural potential, as well as for the return of the land to the legitimate owners. This process of reorganization must be carried out with the greatest respect for nature, in order to protect her and return to her, her strength and capability to generate life.

No less characteristic of a democracy is social justice. This demands a solution to the frightening statistics on infant mortality, of malnutrition, lack of education, analphabetism, wages insufficient to sustain life. These problems have a growing and painful impact on the Guatemalan population and imply no prospects and no hope.

Among the features that characterize society today, is that of the role of women, although female emancipation has not, in fact, been fully achieved so far by any country in the world.

The historical development in Guatemala reflects now the need and the irreversibility of the active contribution of women to the configuration of the new Guatemalan social order, of which, I humbly believe, the Indian women already are a clear testimony. This Nobel Peace Prize is a recognition to those who have been, and still are in most parts of the world, the most exploited of the exploited; the most discriminated of the discriminated, the most marginalized of the marginalized, but still those who produce life and riches.

Democracy, development and modernization of a country are impossible and incongruous without the solution of these problems.

In Guatemala, it is just as important to recognize the Identity and the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples, that have been ignored and despised not only during the colonial period, but also during the Republic. It is not possible to conceive a democratic Guatemala, free and independent, without the indigenous identity shaping its character into all aspects of national existence.

It will undoubtedly be something new, a completely new experience, with features that, at the moment, we cannot describe. But it will authentically respond to history and the characteristics of the real Guatemalan nationality. The true profile that has been distorted for such a long time.

This urgency of this vital need, are the issues that urge me, at this moment, from this rostrum, to urge national opinion and the international community, to show a more active interest in Guatemala.

Taking into consideration that in connection with my role as a Nobel Prize Winner, in the process of negotiations for peace in Guatemala many possibilities have been handled, but now I think that this role is more likely to be the role of a promotor of peace, of national unity, for the protection of the rights of the indigenous peoples. In

such a way, that I may take initiatives in accordance with the needs, and thereby prevent the Peace Prize from becoming a piece of paper that has been pigeonholed.

I call upon all the social and ethnic sectors that constitute the people of Guatemala to participate actively in the efforts to find a peaceful solution to the armed conflict, to build-up a sound unity between the "ladinos,"⁵ the blacks and the Indians, all of whom must create within their diverse groups, a "Guatemality".

Along these same lines, I invite the international community to contribute with specific actions so that the parties involved may overcome the differences that at this stage keep negotiations in a wait-and-see state, so that they will succeed, first of all, in signing an agreement on Human Rights. And then, to re-initiate the rounds of negotiation and identify those issues on which to compromise, to allow for the Peace Agreement to be signed and immediately ratified, because I have no doubt that this will bring about great relief in the prevailing situation in Guatemala.

My opinion is also that the UN should have a more direct participation, which would go further than playing the role of observer, and could help substantially to move the process ahead.

Ladies and gentlemen, the fact that. I have given preference to the American Continent, and in particular to my country, does not mean that I do not have an important place in my mind and in my heart for the concern of other peoples of the world and their constant struggle in the defense of peace, of the right to a life and all its inalienable rights. The majority of us who are gathered here today, constitute an example of the above, and along these lines I would humbly extend to you my gratitude.

Many things have changed in these last years. There have been great changes of worldwide character. The East-West confrontation has ceased to exist and the Cold War has come to an end. These changes, the exact forms of which cannot yet be predicted, have left gaps that the people of the world have known how to make use of in order to come forward, struggle and win national terrain and international recognition.

Today, we must fight for a better world, without poverty, without racism, with peace in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia, to where I address a plea for the liberation of Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize 1991; for a just and peaceful solution, in the Balkans; for the end of the apartheid in South Africa; for the stability in Nicaragua, that the Peace Agreement in El Salvador be observed; for the re-establishment of democracy in Haiti; for the complete sovereignty of Panama; because all of these constitute the highest aims for justice in the international situation.

A world at peace that could provide consistency, interrelations and concordance in respect of the economic, social and cultural structures of the societies would indeed have deep roots and a robust influence.

We have in our mind the deepest felt demands of the entire human race, when we strive for peaceful co-existence and the preservation of the environment. The struggle we fight purifies and shapes the future.

Our history is a living history, that has throbbed, withstood and survived many centuries of sacrifice. Now it comes forward again with strength. The seeds, dormant for such a long time, break out today with some uncertainty, although they germinate in a world that is at present characterized by confusion and uncertainty.

There is no doubt that this process will be long and complex, but it is no Utopia and we, the Indians, we have new confidence in its implementation.

The peoples of Guatemala will mobilize and will be aware of their strength in building up a worthy future. They are preparing themselves to sow the future, to free themselves from atavisms, to rediscover their heritage. To build a country with a genuine national identity. To start a new life.

By combining all the shades and nuances of the "ladinos", the "garífunas"⁶ and Indians in the Guatemalan ethnic mosaic, we must interlace a number of colors without introducing contradictions, without becoming grotesque nor antagonistic, but we must give them brightness and a superior quality, just the way our weavers weave a typical huipil blouse, brilliantly composed, a gift to Humanity.

Thank you very much.

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1. The government and the guerrillas signed a peace agreement in December 1996, but Rigoberta's Nobel medal and diploma still remain at the Museo del Templo Mayor in Mexico City. The Quetzal is the national bird of Guatemala.
 2. The reference is to the Declaration on Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, which was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 18, 1992. The Working Group was the Working Group on Indigenous Populations of the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities.
 3. The revolution of 1944 brought to power the presidential regime of Dr. Juan José Arévalo, who instituted democratic and social reforms. His successor, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, was considered to be pro-communists by the government of President Dwight D. Eisenhower of the United States, which ordered the CIA to cooperate with right-wing and military forces in an armed invasion which overthrew the Arbenz government in 1954. The ensuing period of repression led to the civil war which lasted from 1962 to 1996.
 4. This agreement between the governmental National Commission for Reconciliation and the guerrilla Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity was signed at Oslo in March 1990. It was a further step in the efforts of the two Guatemalan parties to end their armed conflict, a process in which the government of Guatemala was

participating along with El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The five presidents had made several attempts to agree on measures to end the civil wars in Central American countries, one of their summits having taken place in Esquipulas, Guatemala, in 1986. President Oscar Arias Sánchez of Costa Rica took a leading role in these negotiations, which were finally successful in the multilateral agreement signed in August 1987. For his contribution Arias received the Nobel Peace prize that year. See the previous volume in this series, Nobel Lectures. Peace, 1981-1990, pp. 181-182.

5. The ladinos are of Spanish and Indian descent.
6. The garifunas are a tiny ethnic group on the Atlantic coast, of African-Carib descent.

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<https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/on-the-international-day-of-indigenous-peoples-aug-9-1996/>

On The International Day of Indigenous Peoples - Aug. 9, 1996

Rigoberta Menchu

August 09, 1996— Quito, Ecuador

International Day of Indigenous Peoples

The International Day has profound significance, since it is the product of long struggles of indigenous peoples to recover their historic memory, break the silence, improve their conditions of life and affirm their economic, political, social and cultural rights.

At the doors of the third millennium, when there is much uncertainty, the indigenous peoples present flowerings of life and hope. In numerous countries, they have become central actors of new processes that are planting the seeds of a multiethnic, pluricultural and plurilingual future which will be the guarantee of a peace full and harmonious coexistence in these pluralistic societies.

A multiplicity of innovative initiatives and proposals has gestated and consolidated a full and worthy participation of indigenous peoples in diverse aspects of the internal life of their

countries. Deserving special mention is the growing protagonism in the political arena based on the rescue of ethical values and civic dignity with alternatives and proposals that seek to solve local problems as much as national ones.

These achievements are made possible thanks to the fact that the indigenous peoples have begun to look for unity with common goals and objectives. Despite the fact that idea to divide us and cause confrontation between indigenous peoples persists, each day that passes, we overcome lack of unity and consolidate our identity. It is certain that there remains a long road to cover but we are advancing with firm steps.

The International Day is also an occasion to vigorously condemn the grave and systematic violation of the inalienable rights of indigenous peoples, which even affects the right to life. In some countries, extinction is threatening indigenous peoples, while in others they suffer starvation; and the conditions of marginalization, segregation, oppression and racism of which they are victims have generally not been eliminated.

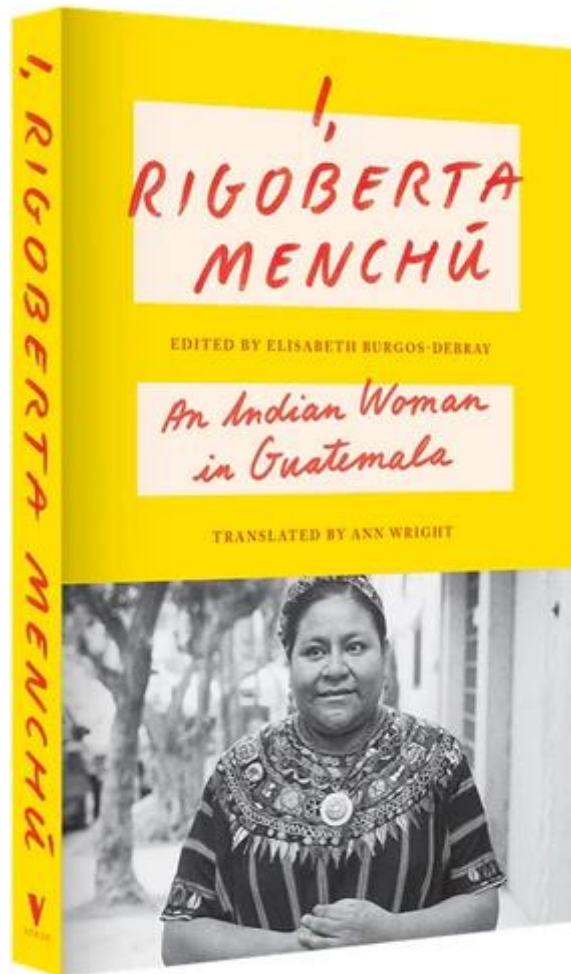
This situation cannot continue. Today on the International Day of Indigenous Peoples, I am making a call to international public opinion to condemn and sanction all types of abuse against indigenous peoples, all violations of their human rights, and all assaults against their dignity. We must not permit silence to continue surrounding the aggressions of which they continue to be the object.

In addition, I call on all governments and demand that they pass the declarations of intentions into actions so that they completely fulfill the commitments undertaken with the International Decade of Indigenous Peoples which was proclaimed by the United Nations in December of 1994, with the purpose of finding viable solutions to the ancestral problems of said populations. In this sense, governments have the urgent responsibility of giving impulse to projects that strengthen and support actions and initiatives by indigenous peoples and institutions that resolve the problems they confront. For this it is also crucial that the states ratify and comply to the diverse international agreements on the rights of these peoples.

Now is the time to responsibly and conscientiously undertake the actions that will lead us to the construction of nations that are truly pluriethnic, multicultural and plurilingual, whose intercultural relations are based on tolerance and the absolute respect for the cultural rights of indigenous and non-indigenous; peoples nations where there is justice and options of development, liberty and real democracy for all, respect to the culture of all and total respect for human rights.

I take advantage of the celebration of the International Day to congratulate the efforts and initiatives of indigenous peoples to resolve their local problems, and their support for the solution of national problems, and I exhort them to continue on the path of unity and determination to give to future generations a world in which peace is not only a dream.

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I, Rigoberta Menchú:
An Indian Woman in Guatemala
by **Rigoberta Menchú**

Introduction by **Elisabeth Burgos-Debray**
Edited by **Elisabeth Burgos-Debray**
Translated by Ann Wright

**The best-selling account of the life of Latin American peasant woman and
winner of the Nobel Peace Prize**

Now a global bestseller, the remarkable life of Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan peasant woman, reflects on the experiences common to many Indian communities in Latin America. Menchú suffered gross injustice and hardship in her early life:

her brother, father and mother were murdered by the Guatemalan military. She learned Spanish and turned to catechistic work as an expression of political revolt as well as religious commitment. Menchú vividly conveys the traditional beliefs of her community and her personal response to feminist and socialist ideas. Above all, these pages are illuminated by the enduring courage and passionate sense of justice of an extraordinary woman.

Reviews

□ A moving account of gruesome repression, gut-wrenching poverty and vicious racism ... A call to conscience.

Nation

□ A fascinating and moving description of the culture of an entire people.

Times (London)

□ A cornerstone of the multicultural canon.

Chronicle of Higher Education

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#IWD2019

Rigoberta Menchú Tum

https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/topic/-iwd2019-rigoberta-menchu-tum_1110



Rigoberta Menchú Tum (born 9 January 1959) is a K'iche' political and human rights activist from Guatemala. Menchú has dedicated her life to publicizing the rights of Guatemala's indigenous feminists during and after the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996), and to promoting indigenous rights in the country.

After leaving school, Menchú has dedicated her life to publicizing the rights of Guatemala's indigenous feminists during and after the Guatemalan Civil War from 1960 to 1996. In 1979-80 her brother Patrocinio and her mother Juana were kidnapped, tortured and murdered by the Guatemalan army. Her father Vicente died in the 1980 Burning of the Spanish Embassy, which occurred after urban guerrillas took hostages and were attacked by government security forces. In 1984 her brother Victor was shot to death after he surrendered to the army, was threatened by soldiers, and tried to escape.

She received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 "in recognition of her work for social justice and ethno-cultural reconciliation based on respect for the rights of indigenous peoples." She has also become a figure in indigenous political parties and ran for President of Guatemala in 2007 and 2011.

Rigoberta Menchú Tum is one of the eight women highlighted at the occasion of the International Women's Day (IWD) which is held every year on 8 March.

IWD is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women.

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Rigoberta Menchú speaks outside the World Bank headquarters in New York on April 21, 2015.

Rigoberta Menchú Paved the Way for an Opening in Guatemala

BY

JOEL WHITNEY

Guatemalan indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú helped set the tone and forge the climate that convicted the rabidly anti-communist general Efraín Ríos Montt and condemned many others guilty of genocide during the country's brutal civil war.

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It is said that our indigenous ancestors, Mayas and Aztecs, made human sacrifices to their gods," Rigoberta Menchú once quipped. "It occurs to me to ask: How many humans have been sacrificed to the gods of capital in the last five hundred years?" The activist's 1983 memoir, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, recounts the shocking story of an American-sponsored counterinsurgency against the majority Maya population.

Acting largely in self-defense in a system of exploitation and forced labor going back centuries, Menchú's fellow Maya were attacked in the name of anti-communism. Tens of thousands of villagers were massacred, whole villages were eradicated, women were raped, and children were killed.

But even before her family was dragged into the insurgency for their humble fight to keep their small parcel of land, Menchú suffered unimaginable losses. Before her decade-long exile to Mexico and Europe — where she told her story in a spoken testimonial that became the acclaimed memoir — she was orphaned by the military regimes that she and her family lived under, losing almost her entire family.

For her candid — if contested — memoir, and for her work on behalf of human and equal rights for Guatemala's Maya, she won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, in a year that marked the five-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival to indigenous America, an anniversary that Maya look upon as a catastrophe.

It's worth remembering that her story didn't end with the Nobel Prize. Menchú founded Winaq, the country's first indigenous political party, and ran as Guatemala's first

indigenous candidate for president, twice. Though she lost, Menchú paved the way for others by helping spur the movement to prosecute Guatemala's corrupt and genocidal Cold War regimes and by creating a Maya-peasant infrastructure that spurred another Maya woman's run for the presidency in 2023.

"Discovery" or Catastrophe?

Rigoberta Menchú Tum was born in Laj Chimel, a village in the remote central highlands of the department of El Quiché. Without electricity or roads, the village felt far away from the Guatemalan Army. "My land is very magic and . . . has mysteries," Menchú told Dawn Gifford Engle, the director of the 2016 documentary *Daughter of the Maya*. Menchú's grandfather, who lived well past one hundred, regaled the family with stories that had been passed down over millennia from the civilization of the Maya.

The accomplishments of the culture of the Maya can hardly be overstated. As *National Geographic* put it, "They built a culture that flowered while Europe languished in the Dark Ages and that survived six times as long as the Roman Empire. They lived by a calendar the equal of [any], developed the concept of zero in mathematics, predicted eclipses of sun and moon, and traced the path of Venus with an error of only 14 seconds a year." When Diego Rivera first saw their classical murals in the Yucatán and the jungles of Chiapas, he is said to have wept. They rivaled the Renaissance murals of Europe and invented a pigment of blue known today as Mayan blue that is close to immortal in how little it fades over centuries on the walls of their temples; it took modern science a century to decode.

Despite the repression of indigenous groups that came with European "discovery," the Maya community survived as a majority in Guatemala. It viewed the destruction of its culture when Europeans arrived as a catastrophe. Stewards of Maya book culture and learning were targeted in particular by the Spanish, who declared themselves the New World's new lords and carved up the continent. In constant danger, Maya elders practiced their traditions in secret.

By the 1700s, Spain was the world's largest empire. It renamed the Maya world "the kingdom of Guatemala." Spanish laws put in place trustees over the indigenous groups, and Spaniards enslaved Mayas on *encomiendas*. Indigenous Americans had no gold, so the Spaniards made their fortunes on slave labor. "There are still elder indigenous people who suffer the consequences of being treated as slaves," Menchú reminds us. "It's just that today, different methods are used."

After Spain's decline in 1821, all of Central and most of Latin America declared its independence. Maya leaders organized to participate in the creation of independent Guatemala. But they were arrested, imprisoned, or executed. The new authoritarian state benefited a privileged few, but it excluded most Guatemalans from citizenship or owning land.

In 1904, Estrada Cabrera gave vast tracts of Guatemala to the United Fruit Company. Founded in 1899, the United Fruit Company became the biggest landowner in Central America and controlled the railroad, the port facilities, and major shipping routes. It also ran its own postal, radio, and telegraph services. By the 1930s, it controlled 80 percent of the US banana trade. Having given it so much land, government forces were often called in to suppress workers who organized against it.

Rigoberta's father, Vicente Menchú, was a farmer who never went to school and who spoke little Spanish. Her mother, Juana Túm, was a traditionalist who taught her children the spiritual roots of Maya culture. A healer and midwife, Juana assisted the mothers in eighteen surrounding villages during childbirth. As someone was going into labor, Juana was led to the distant village to provide medical care. Without factory medicine, she used the community's traditional medicinal plants.

In Menchú's youth, Maya families were forced to work on plantations owned by the country's large landholders. Her village worked these plantations, where Menchú bore the hardships of subsistence child labor from a young age: long hours, wage theft, and brutal conditions. Living as migrants in their own country, the hellish lifestyle took them to the sweltering coast for months each year.

Civil War

In 1950, Vicente Menchú fought for a piece of land of his own. He tried to get the rights to his plot documented. Organizing to unite with other farmers and campesinos instilled a political consciousness in the family. But early in the 1950s came the "Guatemalan Spring": the democratically elected reformist president Jacobo Árbenz took over from his democratically elected reformist predecessor, Juan José Arévalo. Árbenz's landslide victory promised land reform, the freedom to organize, and freedom of speech.



Rigoberta Menchú in 2018.

At the time, 2 percent of the richest families owned two-thirds of the arable land. When Árbenz sought to buy back unused excess lands from United Fruit, the company accused him of “communism” and worked with the CIA to topple him. US vice president Richard Nixon traveled to Guatemala in the wake of the coup to thank General Carlos Castillo Armas, who got a ticker-tape parade and honorary degrees at two universities in New York, Fordham and Columbia.

With democracy overthrown, Maya farmers burned crops in protest as the lands granted to them were retaken for the oligarchs. As punishment for joining these protests, Menchú’s father was persecuted as a communist and sent to prison many times. “The community had to make a huge sacrifice to get him out of jail,” she recalled.

At the farmer’s organization, the Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC), Menchú learned the art of organizing from her father. The CUC was their outlet to forge solutions to the ongoing problem of land rights. Menchú recalls how people from surrounding villages “asked him for advice, and that increased the persecution.” But her father sought to open doors especially for his favorite daughter, who “was accepted by the sister nuns of the Holy Family, and I worked there for three years. After that, they gave me the opportunity to study, and I completed the first four years of primary school in just one year.”

But more trouble awaited her. When Carlos Castillo Armas was assassinated, General Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes ballot-stuffed his way into the presidency. This would spur a civil war that would alter Menchú's fate. The CIA station chief described Ydigoras Fuentes as "a moody, almost schizophrenic individual" who "disregards the advice of his Cabinet."

Ydigoras Fuentes's widespread corruption spurred mass protests, out of which emerged the MR-13 guerrilla group. These left-wing generals tried to oust the erratic Ydigoras Fuentes but their coup failed, resulting in the 1960 civil war. Meanwhile, to prevent the center-left former president Juan José Arévalo from retaking power in the chaos of Ydigoras Fuentes's rule, a right-wing coup toppled the general in 1963. Opposition was met with brutal force that spread to the Maya highlands.

Irregular Locals

In *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the author recalls her transformation as military violence came to El Quiché. As the counterinsurgency violence spread, she learned of an epidemic of women being raped in Maya villages, including the brutal murder of a friend. Villagers were subject to such rampant violence that they had no choice but to defend themselves, mobilizing to create improvised weaponry and to capture guns in ambushes. This placed Menchú in a category the military defined as "Irregular Local Forces." Initially, maneuvers were nonviolent, but the regime targeted them as fighters anyway.

Menchú served as witness to and documenter
of massacres that spurred left-wing movements
across Guatemala to unite.

The first soldier Menchú's defense unit captured was Maya. They let him go with a plea to desert his command. But having gotten little information, they immediately regretted this. The second time they captured a soldier "we got a lot of information . . . about how they treat the soldiers in the army." According to the sympathetic captive, "From the first day I arrived in the barracks, they told me that my parents were stupid" because they couldn't speak Spanish and promised that the army would teach them Spanish. "Then they told me I had to kill the communists from Cuba and Russia. I had to kill them all." When challenged, he replied, "I'm not to blame for all this, they grabbed me in the town." Hearing him cry, they "felt sorry for him, because

we are all human.” Behind the recruitment of Maya was a centuries-old practice of forced labor. But what greater forces were enabling it?

Acknowledging how the Church has often meant “to divide us and keep the poor dormant,” Menchú describes how she maintained Christian faith while observing what Maya ancestors and history have taught. “We have understood that being a Christian means refusing to accept all the injustices which are committed against our people . . . the discrimination committed against a humble people who

barely know what eating meat is.” Beyond the bible, “reality teaches us . . . that we don’t need a Church . . . which knows nothing of hunger. . . . This awakening of the Indians didn’t come . . . from one day to the next, because Catholic Action and other religions . . . have all tried to keep us where we were. But I think that unless a religion springs from within the people themselves, it is a weapon of the system.”

While joining this Maya awakening, Menchú served as witness to and documenter of massacres that spurred left-wing movements across Guatemala to unite. In Panzós, an area of Cobán, “they discovered oil and began throwing peasants off their land. . . . They were Kekchi Indians and the army massacred them as if they were killing birds. . . . Blood ran in the main square.” She found that anti-communism is the most common excuse used to enable counterinsurgency violence.

Ironically, she recalls whole “villages in El Quiché . . . unable to perform their [Maya] ceremonies because they were . . . called subversives and communists.” But under the next US-backed dictator in the late 1970s, it grew even worse. “Lucas García came to power with such a lust for killing, that the repression really began in El Quiché.” The region “was like a . . . rag in his hands”:

He set up military bases in many . . . villages and there were rapes, tortures, kidnappings. And massacres. The villages of Chajul, Cotzal and Nebaj suffered massacres as the repression fell . . . above all on the Indian population.

On September 9, 1979, her brother Patrocinio Menchú Tum was kidnapped by the army. “He disappeared for fifteen days,” Menchú told an interviewer. The family knew people “had been detained in the area, so my mother started to look for him.” The family learns that Patrocinio had been tortured, set on fire, and burned alive in Chajul. “Together with another twenty or so young men around the same age, he was cruelly tortured.” But they “had no idea where his body was left.” Learning of this cruelty “was precisely the moment . . . when I finally felt firmly convinced that if it’s a sin to kill a human being. How can what the regime does to us not be a sin?” As

many *campesinos* did, Menchú and her family redoubled their commitment to their cause, as she longed to tell her people's history to the world.

Embassy Fire

On January 31, 1980, Vicente took part in a march in Guatemala City to protest the army's ongoing kidnapping and murder of poor Maya. It was organized by the CUC. Denied their moment before Congress, protestors were chased into the Spanish embassy. The ensuing police raid — over objections of the Spanish ambassador — culminated in the firebombing of the embassy where thirty-six protestors were burned alive. "My father," she recalls, "was one of those burned to death at the Spanish embassy. There was a general in power who ordered the massacre." The sole survivor (and sole witness to what happened inside the embassy), Gregorio Yujá Xoná was dragged from his hospital bed, tortured, and killed. Spain broke off diplomatic relations with Guatemala over the incident.

After the fire, Menchú returned to Chimel. "I knew that the risk was very high," she recalls, "but I went back, and found my mom very brave, very strong." Juana told her daughter, "I know that your brother has died, and I know that your father has died, but we will keep on fighting." Menchú begged her mother to flee into exile with her. Her mother refused. She soon disappeared. "I was told that my mother was kidnapped," she tells Engle. "Her clothes were taken away. They cut her hair and she was tortured." Menchú later learned that her mother's body was left "on the road that goes from Uspantán to Sicachal." The army ordered a guard to prevent her burial, so that she "was eaten by wild animals."

It felt like her village was being targeted and being wiped out. Though denials were widespread in the Guatemalan media, this is precisely what happened to many Maya villages. "A lot of people from the community were massacred. A helicopter came and bombarded and burned the houses. But because of all this, there are very few people still alive from Chimel, where I was born." With Menchú orphaned, how could it get any worse?

Evangelical Genocide

After a coup d'état by General Efraín Ríos Montt in 1982, what had been an unspoken genocide became more open. Ríos Montt lost his campaign for the presidency in 1974 but was paid off to accept the results and to take a diplomatic post in Madrid before the firebombing that would sever ties between the two countries. Leaving

government, he returned in the late 1970s and converted from Catholicism to a stringent Evangelical Christian sect, the Church of the Word. He befriended right-wing clerics like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. The dictator also sought training (and funding) from Israel and honed his genocidal campaign with the slogan, "If you cannot kill the fish, you must drain the sea."

Meanwhile, left-wing groups forged a united coalition, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, or URNG. It had only grown stronger as a result of the extremist violence of prior administrations. Viewing the movement as communist, Rios Montt's regime envisioned insurgents closing in on Guatemala's populous areas from the rural regions. So, his generals continued the army's genocidal atrocities. Beginning in the city and suburbs, the army fanned outward in concentric circles. But they did so under the cover of "protecting civilians." In areas that were "secure," they offered social programs.

After US aid was curtailed under President Jimmy Carter as a result of Guatemala's rampant human rights violations, the Ronald Reagan administration sent aid through Evangelical Christian networks in an operation code-named "International Love Lift." But the love was a thinly veiled cover for more overt genocidal eradication of the left-wing movements and the nation's indigenous majority.

By Rios Montt's second year, the concentric rippling circles of murderous counterinsurgency came to the western border. Just as elsewhere in the country, massacres in the highlands targeted the Maya poor. In July, 1982, twenty-five kilometers from Asturias's grandparents' house, 268 Maya were massacred in the village of Rabinal. Soldiers moved from house to house, grabbing children and beating them to death. Women were raped and killed. The rest were shot. The next day, survivors were forced to dig mass graves before joining the Guatemalan Army.



Menchú demands accountability from Chevron at a demonstration outside of the World Bank headquarters in 2015.

In Dos Erres, in Petén, 160 Maya residents were massacred by government soldiers. In Rio Negro, 440 were killed, while 5000 were killed in the area between 1980 and 1982. During the long civil war which lasted until 1996, 626 indigenous villages were destroyed, vanishing from the map. Of the more than two hundred thousand casualties that would haunt the nation for years, most were Maya. A third of these casualties, an estimated seventy to seventy-five thousand, occurred during Rios Montt's sixteen months in power.

In Exile

Her village decimated, and without siblings, Menchú turned to the Sisters of the Holy Family, whose nuns helped her escape to the safety of exile in Mexico. "I live near your country. I see your country every day," Bishop Samuel Luís García, of Chiapas, told her. With few options, she crossed the border to the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas. "The *compañeros* got me out on a plane to Mexico, and I felt a shattered, broken woman, because I'd never imagined that one day those criminals would force me to abandon my country. All the same, I also hoped to come back very soon and carry on working." The Monsignor gave her sleep medicine for PTSD and she slept for two weeks. When she emerged better rested, he told her, "You must come with me to the communities."

For six months, Menchú and the cleric traveled through the jungle, visiting indigenous communities in the most remote parts of Chiapas, where a revolutionary movement was already under way. Though the more famous Zapatista uprising went public in response to NAFTA on January 1, 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army emerged from the National Liberation Front in the period when Menchú was touring the jungles and villages of Chiapas. What they finally would build was an autonomous zone for indigenous people who radically reimagined how sovereign nation-states should be run. The registered inhabitants received free health care and schools for all, while maintaining land sovereignty and control over agriculture and other resources.

"Those people gave me a forward-looking perspective," she said of her experience.

By 1982 and for nearly a decade, thousands of other Maya fled over the border into Mexico. Many were en route to the United States to escape General Rios Montt and successor dictatorships supported and trained by the United States. In Mexico, the Guatemalan refugee community grew to more than fifty thousand. Menchú became active in the community, campaigning to tell the world what was happening to her people.

She traveled to New York to meet with United Nations delegates and to Geneva to warn European leaders of the atrocities. During a week spent with Venezuelan sociologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray in Paris, Menchú told her story in what became her widely translated *testimonio*, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. She offered voiceover narration for the film *When the Mountains Tremble*; and for ten years she traveled and spoke before global audiences, sharing tales of her awakening as a result of her people's suffering in Guatemala. The book became a bestseller.

"The World is Watching!"

When she returned briefly from exile in October 1992, she was greeted by Adolfo Pérez Esquivel of Argentina, a Nobel Peace Prize winner. She joined her community in marking five hundred years since Columbus had landed in the Americas. Millions of indigenous people across the continent held protests that day. "I believe this is a very important day. Many brothers and sisters around the world, especially on this continent, are demonstrating in the same way," she said.

On October 16, 1992, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace as a result of Pérez Esquivel's nomination. The committee granted the prize "for her struggle for social justice and ethno-cultural reconciliation based on respect for the rights of indigenous peoples." On a post-award tour in a pickup truck, she told crowds of fellow Maya who lined the streets, "Today, the world is watching." Her words were met with shouts: "Long live Rigoberta Menchú, long live the Maya Quiché! Long live peace!"

In tears, she replied, "This is the first official press conference I am giving after the great happiness of learning that I won the Nobel Peace Prize. I would like to offer a tribute to all my indigenous brothers and sisters of America. I know that you are listening to me in every single corner. You have fought for this. This is not because of the personal merits of Rigoberta Menchú. It is for the memory of America."

Villagers in many cases were asked to identify the Catholic leaders who helped protect and feed them. When they did so, they were mowed down, followed by the leaders they had named.

Indigenous activists now had the world's attention. But the brutal atrocities by the Guatemalan military continued. The Maya resistance was chased through mountains in the country's unyielding campaigns of eradication and scorched earth. Villagers in many cases were asked to identify the Catholic leaders who helped protect and feed

them. When they did so, they were mowed down, followed by the leaders they had named.

In January 1993, as a tentative cease-fire was being negotiated, a wave of civil war refugees returned home. "Our children need a guarantee for their future," Menchú declared. "We cannot leave them a world of uncertainty. We want to leave a more secure world so that the land becomes their land, today and forever. Then they can live here and cultivate their greatest potential and creativity."

"Historical Truth"

Menchú married fellow refugee Angel Canil Grave, and they adopted a son, Maj. During peace talks in Mexico City beginning in 1994, Menchú said that her group listened at the door:

And when they came out, we pressured them. We told them, "This needs to happen. You have to write this down." And we proposed content for the peace agreement. We were very active with the refugees. There were more than fifty thousand in Mexico. The refugees were a very strong force, with the muscle to say no to war. "No more war. Yes to peace." And this put pressure on both sides. . . . The mothers said, "I don't want my son drafted into the war, not by the guerrillas, nor by the Army. . . ." It was the mothers who were pushing hardest to end the war.

When the peace deal was signed in Oslo in 1996, Menchú was invited to speak. "When in this solemn place we received the Nobel Peace Prize, we had the hope that one day we could talk of peace." But negotiations stalled on questions over whether mass murderers and torturers could be forgiven or forgotten. Yet once the accords were finally signed, Menchú immediately campaigned for justice. "The people fought for their land, they fought for a piece of land, to farm it, to have a future for their children, a secure life," she said. "And the security they were seeking led them to death. I think that if it was a personal offense, it would be easier to forgive, forget, and start a new life. But this is not a personal horror, or a personal offense. It's a collective offense. It is the collective memory of Guatemala."

In 1998, Larry Rohter, writing in the *New York Times* and citing the work of anthropologist and Middlebury College professor David Stoll, accused Menchú of fabricating or conflating key parts of her autobiography. But when a truth commission — the Commission for Historical Clarification — was launched under the auspices of the United Nations, Menchú and her allies remained focused on demanding justice for loved ones who were abducted, tortured, and killed during the civil war. It was a

country littered with clandestine graves. As the truth commission proceeded, it made sure not to accuse any of the army's officers before verifying the facts. "We the victims are the ones who should be in charge of everything having to do with claims for justice," Menchú said. "This justice we seek would be meaningless if we only learn what happened, because the victims already know what happened."

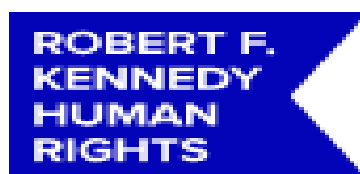
The findings, indeed, were clear. In 1999, the *New York Times* reported that

The truth commission . . . concluded that the United States gave money and training to a Guatemalan military that committed "acts of genocide" against the Mayans during the most brutal armed conflict in Central America, Guatemala's 36-year civil war. . . . The report, by the independent Historical Clarification Commission, contradicts years of official denials of the torture, kidnapping and execution of thousands of civilians in a war that the commission estimated killed more than 200,000 people. The commission listed the American training of the officer corps in counterinsurgency techniques as a key factor that "had a significant bearing on human rights violations during the armed confrontation."

But when her father's killer, Pedro Garcia Arredondo, former head of "Command 6," a special investigations unit of the now defunct National Police, was convicted of homicide and crimes against humanity in 2015 for his leadership of the 1980 siege of the Spanish embassy, Menchú was "vindicated," as Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Greg Grandin [described](#) the matter in the *Nation*.

Indeed, Menchú helped set the tone and forge the climate that convicted him and condemned many others guilty of genocide. Her lawsuit also led to the conviction for genocide of the dictator Rios Montt. Finally, "there'll be a time," she vowed, "when things will be different, when we'll all be happy, perhaps not with nice houses, but at least we won't see our lands running with blood and sweat."

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Rigoberta Menchú Tum

<https://rfkhumanrights.org/person/rigoberta-menchu-tum/>



Interview:

Struggles for the rights of poor people, for dignity, for human life, seem to be very, very dark tunnels, but one should always try, in that struggle, to find some light and some hope. The most important thing to have is a great quantity of positive feelings and thoughts. Even though one can easily be pessimistic, I always attempt to look for the highest values that human beings could possibly have. We have to invent hope all over again. One day, sadly, I said to myself with great conviction: the death of my parents can never be recuperated. Their lives cannot be brought back. And what can also never, never be recuperated is the violation of their dignity as human beings. Nothing will ever convince me that anything could happen to pay back that debt.

Now, I don't think this realization is a personal matter; rather, it is a social question. It's a question of a society, of history, of all memory. Those of us who are victims are the ones that decide what pardons are going to take place, and under what sort of conditions. We, who have survived the crimes, are the ones who should have the last words, not those observing. I respect the opinions of those who say that a decree or an accord or a religious philosophy is enough to pardon others, but I

really would like, much more than that, to hear the voice of the victims. And at this moment, the victims are really not listened to.

An amnesty is invented by two actors in a war. It's hardly the idea of the victims, or of the society. Two armed groups who have been combating each other decide that it is best for each to pardon the other. This is the whole vulgar reality that the struggle for human rights has to go through at this moment.

An agreement with real dialogue would bring war to an end as soon as possible. But I never could accept that two sides that have committed horrendous atrocities could simply pardon themselves. What the amnesties do is simply forget and obliterate, with one simple signature, all the violations of human rights that have taken place. Many of these abuses continue in the lives of the victims, in the orphans of that conflict. So even though there are amnesties in countries such as Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, and Guatemala, I can see that people do not forget the human rights violations that they have suffered, and they continue to live them. These are things that are not going to be forgotten.

A real reconciliation has to be based on the search for truth. We who are the victims of these abuses have a right to the truth. Finding the truth is not enough. What we also have to find is justice. And the ways, the processes, and the means by which this justice can be accomplished are through law and through the courts, through procedures that are legal.

This is why I now have a legal case in Guatemala against the military. We have a lot of corrupt judges; we know about bribery and threats. The military does not want to set a precedent for real justice, so they bribe the entire legal system. One of these days that system will become fairer. But we have to give time to the system of justice to improve.

Living in a country of such violence, of such a history of blood, no one, no one would want to bring a child into this world. I was a militant woman in the cause of justice. And for twelve years I did not have a home of my own or a family. I lived in refugee camps when I could. I lived in the homes of nuns in Mexico. I left behind many, many bags in many different countries, in many different buildings. Under those circumstances, what would I have done with a child? I was involved in all kinds of risks, and thought that maybe I would have to sacrifice my

life for my people. When one says that, you understand, it is not just a slogan, but a real-life experience. I exposed myself to the most difficult kinds of situations.

I met my husband in 1992. When I met him, I really didn't think that it was going to be a longstanding relationship. How could it, when I was always going from one place to another, almost like a vagabond? My husband's family, in particular, helped me a great deal in stabilizing my life. It only happened because my future in-laws were really very persistent and just insisted—all the time— that we get married, even if it was only a civil wedding. They were worried about what the family, what the society, what the community, what everybody else would think, if we weren't married. For me, it didn't have any particular importance.

For me stability began with another wish: it was very important to find, once again, my sister Ana. She was the youngest of the family. She had decided that she was going to live with me, but I didn't have a home where she could live. I began to actually have the desire to have a home, a desire that coincided with the time when I was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Many friends, people who gave me counselling thought that it would be better for me, too. After all, you can't have a Nobel Prize winner wandering around the world semi-clandestinely!

I give thanks to Mexico—to the people of Mexico, and at that time, to the authorities, the officials of Mexico City—who offered me that sense of stability in a very short period of time. The office of the mayor gave me a house, and in that house, we were able to construct for ourselves, once again, a very normal life. We were once again a family. I'd left Guatemala in 1981, but though I'd returned in 1988, I was detained, so I was forced to leave again. After that I would come and go in and out of Guatemala, but I could never stay for very long. Finally, in 1994, we went back, officially.

Home is important to me for another reason. I have two children now—one who I lost. It just changes around your life completely when you have a child, doesn't it? You can't be just moving around the world in any way that you want anymore. So, you live life according to the circumstances that you are in. I can't say, though, that I ever had the intention of living my life, or any part of my life, quite the way in which I lived it! Things just happened. Suddenly I was caught up in the situation. And I tried to overcome it, with a lot of good will and not a

whole lot of introspection. Now my son lives with my family, with my sister and my nephews; there are seven children in the house. There are two twins, two years old, a daughter of my sister-in-law, and four children who don't have a father. But we live in a large family, and that gives my son a great deal of satisfaction. He has a community every day.

My youngest son, whose name was Tzunun, which means hummingbird, was part of a very, very difficult pregnancy. It was risky from the very first day. It required a tremendous desire to be a mother, to carry it through, and I had decided to have this child. All my work, all my activities had to be stopped. Still, so sadly, he lived only three days. But when he died, I thought that he had lived with me for many, many years. I talked to him, I understood him, we thought he could perceive things around him.

During this time, I was always thinking about the world and listening to the news and trying to find out what was going on. And when you really listen it has a very, very big impact on you. Because when you are going around to conferences and talking to people and people are applauding you, you really don't fully realize what a terrible situation that women and children are in. But being at home, in your own four walls, and knowing what is happening in the world, you really feel very limited in what you are doing and what you can do. My child gave me time to sit back and to think about the condition of women, and children, and children who don't have parents, and children who are abused by their parents. My situation, my condition as a mother is a great, great privilege: not just some kind of decree, or law, or desire, but something that, fundamentally, has transformed my life.

There have been a lot of successes in my life. And when you have success, it helps you to want to continue the struggle. You are not alone, for it's not true that it is only pain that motivates people to continue struggling to make their convictions a reality. The love of many other people, the support that one has from other people, and above all, the understanding of other people, has a lot to do with it. It's when one realizes that there are a lot of other people in the world that think the way you do, that you feel you are engaged in a larger undertaking. Every night when I go to sleep, I say a prayer that more people, more allies will support the world's struggles. That's the most important thing. That would be so good.

Originally appeared in *Speak Truth to Power: Human Rights Defenders Who Are Changing Our World* by Kerry Kennedy.

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Legacy

Awards and Honors



The Nobel Peace Prize Medal awarded to Menchú is safeguarded in the Museo del Templo Mayor in Mexico City.

- 1992 [Nobel Peace Prize](#) for her advocacy and social justice work for the indigenous peoples of Latin America
- 1992 UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador position for her advocacy for the indigenous peoples of Guatemala
 - Menchú was the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize at the time, and the first indigenous people recipient.
- 1996 Peace Abbey Courage of Conscience Award for her authorship and advocacy for the indigenous peoples of Guatemala
- 1998 [Prince of Asturias Prize](#) for improving the condition of women and the communities they serve. (Jointly with 6 other women.)
- 1999 asteroid [9481 Menchú](#) was named in her honor ([M.P.C.](#) 34354)
- 2010 [Order of the Aztec Eagle](#) for services provided for Mexico
- 2018 Spendlove Prize for her advocacy for minority groups
- In 2022, the [University of Bordeaux Montaigne](#), located in [Pessac](#), gave her name to its newly built library in her honor.

Publications

- *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983)
 - This book, also titled *My Name is Rigoberta Menchú and that's how my Conscience was Born*, was dictated by Menchú and transcribed by Elizabeth Burgos
- *Crossing Borders* (1998)
- *Daughter of the Maya* (1999)

- *The Girl from Chimel* (2005) with Dante Liano, illustrated by Domi
- *The Honey Jar* (2006) with Dante Liano, illustrated by Domi
- *The Secret Legacy* (2008) with Dante Liano, illustrated by Domi
- *K'aslemalil-Vivir. El caminar de Rigoberta Menchú Tum en el Tiempo* (2012)

Testimony controversy

More than a decade after the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, anthropologist [David Stoll](#) investigated Menchú's story and claimed that Menchú changed some elements about her life, family, and village to meet the publicity needs of the guerrilla movement. Stoll acknowledged the violence against the Maya civilians in his book, *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans*, but believed the guerillas were responsible for the army's atrocities. The controversy caused by Stoll's book received widespread coverage in the US press of the time; thus the [New York Times](#) highlighted a few claims in her book contradicted by other sources:

A younger brother whom Ms. Menchu says she saw die of starvation never existed, while a second, whose suffering she says she and her parents were forced to watch as he was being burned alive by army troops, was killed in entirely different circumstances when the family was not present. Contrary to Ms. Menchu's assertion in the first page of her book that *I never went to school* and could not speak Spanish or read or write until shortly before she dictated the text of *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, she in fact received the equivalent of a middle-school education as a scholarship student at two prestigious private boarding schools operated by Roman Catholic nuns.

Many authors have defended Menchú, and attributed the controversy to different interpretations of the testimonio genre. Menchú herself states, "I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people." An error in *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans* is Stoll's representation of the massacre at the Spanish embassy in Guatemala in 1980 as a self-immolation coordinated by student and indigenous leaders of the peasant protesters occupying the embassy; investigators in 1981 reported on the massacre and the [La Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico](#) (Commission for the Historical Clarification-CEH) and published findings concluding that the army carried out a premeditated firebombing of the embassy.

Later, a declassified CIA document from late February 1982 states that in mid-February 1982 the Guatemalan army reinforced its existing forces and launched a "sweep operation in the [Ixil Triangle](#); and commanding officers of the units involved had been instructed to destroy all towns and villages which were cooperating in the [Guerrilla Army of the Poor](#) (EGP) and eliminate all sources of resistance." Which was a fallacy recently repeated in the Times Literary Supplement by Ian Stavans in his review of Stoll's book. Some scholars have stated that, despite its factual and historical

inaccuracies, Menchú's testimony remains relevant for the ways in which it depicts the life of an Indigenous Guatemalan during the civil war.

The Nobel Committee dismissed calls to revoke Menchú's Nobel Prize, in spite of Stoll's allegations regarding Menchú. [Geir Lundestad](#), the secretary of the committee, stated that Menchú's prize was awarded because of her advocacy and social justice work, not because of her testimony, and that she had committed no observable wrongdoing.

According to Mark Horowitz, William Yaworsky, and Kenneth Kickham, the controversy about Stoll's account of Menchu is one of the three most divisive episodes in recent American anthropological history, along with controversies about the truthfulness of [Margaret Mead's](#) *Coming of Age in Samoa* and [Napoleon Chagnon's](#) representation of violence among the [Yanomami](#).

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QUOTABLE QUOTES



I am like a drop of water on a rock. After drip, drip, dripping in the same place, I begin to leave a mark, and I leave my mark in many people's hearts.

—*Rigoberta Menchú*

- ❖ The indigenous peoples never had, and still do not have, the place that they should have occupied in the progress and benefits of science and technology, although they represented an important basis for this development.

- ❖ It is not possible to conceive a democratic Guatemala, free and independent, without the indigenous identity shaping its character into all aspects of national existence.
- ❖ It is not possible to conceive a democratic Guatemala, free and independent, without the indigenous identity shaping its character into all aspects of national existence.
- ❖ I feel a deep emotion and pride for the honor of having been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 1992.
- ❖ Let there be freedom for the Indians, wherever they may be in the American Continent or elsewhere in the world, because while they are alive, a glow of hope will be alive as well as a true concept of life.
- ❖ The priests say the new dawn will be like the rain that fertilizes the soil before we begin to plant our corn. It will renew the natural cycle of life. The Mayan people will once again flourish. I believe in this very strongly. The holy men say we are entering a period of clarity. We are rediscovering our Mayan values.
- ❖ Peace cannot exist without justice, justice cannot exist without fairness, fairness cannot exist without development, development cannot exist without democracy, democracy cannot exist without respect for the identity and worth of cultures and peoples.
- ❖ What I treasure most in life is being able to dream. During my most difficult moments and complex situations. I have been able to dream of a more beautiful future.
- ❖ ...instead of giving a rifle to somebody, build a school; instead of giving a rifle, build a community with adequate services. Instead of giving a rifle, develop an educational system that is not about conflict and

violence, but one that promotes respect for values, for life, and respect for one's elders. This requires a huge investment. Yet if we can invest in a different vision of peaceful coexistence, I think we can change the world, because every problem has a nonviolent answer.

- ❖ I resolutely believe that respect for diversity is a fundamental pillar in the eradication of racism, xenophobia and intolerance. There is no excuse for evading the responsibility of finding the most suitable path toward the elimination of any expression of discrimination against indigenous peoples.
- ❖ We have learned that change cannot come through war. War is not a feasible tool to use in fighting against the oppression we face. War has caused more problems. We cannot embrace that path.
- ❖ I think that nonviolence is one way of saying that there are other ways to solve problems, not only through weapons and war. Nonviolence also means the recognition that the person on one side of the trench and the person on the other side of the trench is both human beings, with the same faculties. At some point they have to begin to understand one another.
- ❖ The Mayas, our grandparents, always said; every human being occupies a small piece of time. Time itself is much longer, and because of this they always said that we must care for this earth while we are on it because it will be part of our children and the children of our grandchildren. They know that life is short, that it can end so soon, and that if one gets lost on the way, others will come to take their place.



Rigoberta Menchú Tum

Biographical

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1992/tum/biographical/>

Rigoberta Menchú was born on January 9, 1959 to a poor Indian peasant family and raised in the Quiche branch of the Maya culture. In her early years she helped with the family farm work, either in the northern highlands where her family lived, or on the Pacific coast, where both adults and children went to pick coffee on the big plantations.

Rigoberta Menchú soon became involved in social reform activities through the Catholic Church, and became prominent in the women's rights movement when still only a teenager. Such reform work aroused considerable opposition in influential circles, especially after a guerilla organization established itself in the area. The Menchú family was accused of taking part in guerrilla activities and Rigoberta's father, Vicente, was imprisoned and tortured for allegedly having participated in the execution of a local plantation owner. After his release, he joined the recently founded Committee of the Peasant Union (CUC).

In 1979, Rigoberta, too, joined the CUC. That year her brother was arrested, tortured and killed by the army. The following year, her father was killed when security forces in the capital stormed the Spanish Embassy where he and some other peasants were staying. Shortly afterwards, her mother also died after having been arrested, tortured and raped. Rigoberta became increasingly active in the CUC, and taught herself Spanish as well as other Mayan languages than her native Quiche. In 1980, she figured prominently in a strike the CUC organized for better conditions for farm workers

on the Pacific coast, and on May 1, 1981, she was active in large demonstrations in the capital. She joined the radical 31st of January Popular Front, in which her contribution chiefly consisted of educating the Indian peasant population in resistance to massive military oppression.

In 1981, Rigoberta Menchú had to go into hiding in Guatemala, and then flee to Mexico. That marked the beginning of a new phase in her life: as the organizer abroad of resistance to oppression in Guatemala and the struggle for Indian peasant peoples' rights. In 1982, she took part in the founding of the joint opposition body, The United Representation of the Guatemalan Opposition (RUOG). In 1983, she told her life story to Elisabeth Burgos Debray. The resulting book, called in English, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, is a gripping human document which attracted considerable international attention. In 1986, Rigoberta Menchú became a member of the National Coordinating Committee of the CUC, and the following year she performed as the narrator in a powerful film called *When the Mountains Tremble*, about the struggles and sufferings of the Maya people. On at least three occasions, Rigoberta Menchú has returned to Guatemala to plead the cause of the Indian peasants, but death threats have forced her to return into exile.

Over the years, Rigoberta Menchú has become widely known as a leading advocate of Indian rights and ethno-cultural reconciliation, not only in Guatemala but in the Western Hemisphere generally, and her work has earned her several international awards.

